

Edgewater  
Station Road  
Barrytown Vicinity  
Dutchess County  
New York

HABS No. NY-5621

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NY,  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington D. C. 20240

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

EDGEWATER

HABS No. NY-5621

Location: Station Road. Barrytown Vicinity, Dutchess County, New York.

Present Owner and Occupant: Richard H. Jenrette

Present Use: Residence

Significance: This superb 1824 temple-fronted house with fine Federal details faces the Hudson River. Edgewater was constructed for John R. Livingston of Massena as a wedding gift for his daughter and Captain Rawlins Lowndes Brown. John Livingston, one of ten children of Judge Robert and Margaret Beekman Livingston, also made his home along the river on land that had been part of the extensive Beekman patent and, later, the Livingston estate. Edgewater was enhanced by the addition of a library, conservatory and outbuildings by the noted architect Alexander Jackson Davis in 1854 for his patron Robert Donaldson, Edgewater's second owner. The house is one of twenty-one contiguous estates on the east bank of the Hudson between Staatsburg and Tivoli, New York.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Edgewater was constructed in 1824 as a wedding gift from John R. Livingston to his daughter, Margaret, and her husband, Captain Rawlins Lowndes Brown.
2. Architect: The architect of the original house is not known. The Library, conservatory and gatehouses were designed by A. J. Davis in 1854.
3. Original and subsequent owners:
 

1824	Deed recorded November 29, 1824, in Liber 32, page 87 John R. Livingston, Esq. to Margaret Livingston Brown and Captain Lowndes Brown (gift)
1853	Deed recorded February 3, 1853 in Liber 97, page 578 Margaret L. Brown to Robert Donaldson for \$22,500

- 1872 Will recorded July 5, 1872, in Book 1, page 620  
Will contested successfully by Donaldson children
- 1902 Deed recorded September 17, 1902, in Liber 322, page 142  
Robert Bronson, executor of estate of Elizabeth Donaldson  
to  
Elizabeth Chapman for \$20,000, including south gatehouse
- 1917 Deed recorded March 3, 1917  
Liber 397, page 77  
Elizabeth W. Chapman  
to  
Conrad Chapman for \$1.00, including only main house
- 1946 Deed recorded July 8, 1946, Liber 644, page 116  
Conrad Chapman  
to  
Laura M. Taylor for \$1.00, without tax stamps
- 1950 Deed recorded July 26, 1950, Liber 750, page 540  
Laura M. Taylor  
to  
Gore Vidal for \$16,000
- 1969 Deed recorded December 30, 1969, Liber 1279, page 590  
Gore Vidal  
to  
Richard H. Jenrette for \$125,000, including main house  
and 2.96 acres

4. Original plans and construction: Edgewater, erected in 1824, suggests the new Greek Revival style, but it more strongly reflects an earlier Jeffersonian classicism. Roman Doric, however, is used rather than Jefferson's preferred Ionic. In an 1845 view from Valentine's Manual of Old New York, Edgewater is shown in its temple form, without the library and conservatory.

The window configuration in the tympanum was a common feature of the earlier classicism. In a March 1854 letter from the second owner, Robert Donaldson, to his architect, Alexander J. Davis, he wrote:

P.S. I notice your uneasiness about the tympanum of my pediment here...and I admit that Windows are not as elegant as Sculpture in Attic Ruins... but what authority have you for Windows at all... Chimney or Roof in the Greek Temple?

(Donaldson to Davis, March 1854, A. J. Davis Collection, Avery Library, Columbia University, New York, New York.)

A clue to the architect's intentions is revealed in the use, with only minor changes, of the Doric order following Asher Benjamin's Plate XIII in the 1806 edition of The American Builders Companion.

At the east elevation, the gable end of the roof is pedimented and contains windows. An entrance porch with a pair of freestanding double columns counters the portico of the west front. The porch and the simplicity of the windows and wall surface suggest the Greek Revival.

The delicate interior details, such as the slim reeded door frames, reflect the earlier tradition.

5. Additions and alterations: In 1853 Robert Donaldson purchased the Edgewater property for speculation and subdivision. He planned to have A. J. Davis design a villa for him on a hilltop lot, but less than a year later Donaldson decided to abandon the building of a new home and make improvements on his magnificently sited river house. Before reaching this major decision, small changes were made to the eastern entrance porch.

We wish to ornament the top of the Eastern Porch here ... and I propose to remove the present plain parapet and to place some boldly carved Grecian honeysuckles upon the verge.

(Donaldson to Davis, 3 May 1853, A. J. Davis Collection, Avery Library, Columbia University, New York, New York.)

Although only the center cresting remains, old photographs reveal additional corner decorations. These same photos indicate that the porch has been rebuilt; the porch columns once were spaced more widely and the side handrails differed.

The major additions to the house were made in 1854. The original intention was to erect a pair of octagonal wings at each end of the house; one to serve as a library-picture gallery and the other as an elegant greenhouse. A letter of March 13, 1854, contains a sketch by Donaldson of a floor plan which illustrates this idea. Instead of a greenhouse, however, a small half-octagon conservatory was incorporated into the south wall of the dining room.

The library-picture gallery on the north was built as envisioned, an octagonal pavilion connected to the main house by a walkway. The interior space that Davis created is both dramatic and exotic with its octagonal plan, high conical ceiling, and lantern-like oculus. This addition, originally planned as one of a pair, suggests the one story dependencies that were characteristic of Jefferson's classicism: two balanced subsidiary wings dominated by the central block. While only one wing was added to Edgewater, Davis still strove to achieve this delicate balance. Physical evidence suggests that he designed a landscaped slope up to the house in addition to covering the pedestals which supported the portico's columns. By reducing the mass and impact of the portico, the library pavilion and conservatory were balanced harmoniously.

Davis' account books show that he began designs for the library on June 22, 1854 (Day Book of A. J. Davis, June 22, 1854, A. J. Davis Collection, Avery Library, Columbia University, New York, New York) and worked throughout the summer. (Journal of A. J. Davis, A. J. Davis Collection, New York Historical Society, New York, New York). By September 22, 1854, eight working drawings were finished and the windows had been ordered from Osborn. An entry in November indicates that Davis made a visit to inspect the construction progress.

The old photographs in Mr. Jenrette's possession show that both end bays on the east elevation and the second and fourth bays on the west side once were blind. It is possible that Davis made these alterations to affect a more severe wall surface, thereby creating a design that was more in keeping with the Greek Revival. Although the windows were stuccoed, they still were defined by their lintels and the visible outline of the frames, a distraction uncharacteristic of Davis.

These old views, photographed sometime after the Davis work, indicate that the stucco on the main house was scored into blocks to simulate stone. The library stucco, however, was not articulated. Letters of March 1855 and April 1856 from Donaldson asked Davis to secure the services of George Gill of New Haven, whom Davis thought the best stucco craftsman in the country, or H. O. Beach, who had been trained by Gill. The 1855 letter mentions unfinished construction and the need for stucco work, probably a reference to the library. The second request in 1856 might indicate that the main house had been finished.

6. Historic context: Edgewater was constructed for John R. Livingston of Massena as a gift for his daughter after her marriage in 1819 to Captain Rawlins Lowndes Brown of Charleston, South Carolina. John Livingston, one of ten children of the distinguished Judge Robert Livingston and Margaret Beekman Livingston, made his home along the Hudson on land that had been part of the extensive Beekman patent. Strong family ties and important land holdings made generations of Livingston descendants an important force along the Hudson.

The choice of a temple-fronted design, a new type in the Hudson Valley, might have been made by Captain Brown or perhaps as an effort to make him at home in the north. The Browns lived at Edgewater for thirty years. By 1853, the railroad exercised its right of way and had built tracks close to the house. After Captain Brown died and the only child, Harriet, married Mr. Solvyn of the Belgian Embassy, Mrs. Brown sold Edgewater to accompany her daughter to London where Solvyn was the representative of King Leopold. Many of the original furnishings are now in the possession of a descendent in Europe.

The estate was sold to Robert Donaldson, the noted patron of A. J. Davis and former owner of the Davis-designed Blithewood at Fishkill, New York. Donaldson was a native North Carolinian with financial interests in New York and North Carolina. His wife, Susan, was the daughter of the North Carolina Supreme Court Justice William Gaston. They spent winters in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and summers on the Hudson, and in later years favored Edgewater.

As Davis' patron and friend, Donaldson secured many commissions for him, such as his work at the University of North Carolina, and also introduced him to Andrew Johnson Downing. When the architect had financial problems, Donaldson lent money to Davis to publish Rural Residences. Years after Edgewater was completed, Donaldson wrote,

It sometimes occurs to me, the Rural Architecture and Villa embellishments which have since gone on - to the great improvement of Country Life, notwithstanding the overdone gingerbread and be-gabled houses which abound. ... Downing stole your thunder for awhile - but I always, on suitable occasion, claimed for you the seminal ideas which have been so fruitful.

(Donaldson to Davis, 12 May 1863, A. J. Davis Collection, Avery Library, Columbia University, New York, New York.)

Donaldson bought the two hundred fifty acre property for speculation and subdivision. He planned to have Davis design a villa for him on a hilltop lot. After living at the house for a year, he wrote to Davis, "You will be surprised and perhaps pained? to learn that I have given up all purposes of building a villa upon the heights and intend to live and die in this Greek temple." (Donaldson to Davis, 18 July 1854, A. J. Davis Collection, Avery Library, Columbia University, New York, New York.)

Donaldson then commissioned Davis to make numerous improvements to the house and property: a library addition, gatehouses, chapel, schoolhouse, garden structures, workers' cottages, and a boathouse.

Edited by Susan Stein, 1981

## PART II. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

(See PART II, EDGEWATER GATEHOUSES, HABS No. NY-5621 (A & B))

## PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

(See PART III, EDGEWATER GATEHOUSES, HABS NO. NY-5621 (A & B))